



# A Season of Harvest

## PSD Ministry Resource for Church Closure

Closing a congregation is just as significant as opening it, and celebrating the harvest God has given is just as important as the planting. Congregations, like all things under heaven, have a season. Those about which we read in the New Testament do not exist today as they once did, yet God worked through them for a harvest of people who remain for eternity. You may now find yourself in a season of remembrance, thanksgiving, and even grief.

Ending its season of ministry is not an experience any congregation desires and many never expect. Your fellow believers, even fellow Missouri-Synod Lutherans, across the country are praying about mergers and closures. Some are tempted to describe their circumstance with words like “success” or “failure,” putting the emphasis, and the blame, on themselves and others. The words “redemption” and “opportunity” are far better descriptors of God’s work in these situations. The extension of His kingdom is not limited by our congregation or imagination.

Our assurance in a time of uncertainty is in the God who declares that “all things work together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose.” Romans 8:28 (ESV) He brought redemption through the cross of Christ and will redeem even the closure of a congregation for His good purpose. He may reveal a new ministry, provide resources for other Gospel opportunities, or make new connections among believers. Though we may not know all that He intends, we are confident that “If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, how will He not with Him graciously give us all things.” Romans 8:31-32

In this resource, you will find answers to these questions you and your congregation may be asking about this next step in ministry:

**When should we consider closure as a possibility?**

**Which steps should we take during the closure process?**

**What actions or assumptions should we avoid during closure?**

# WHEN SHOULD WE CONSIDER CLOSURE AS A POSSIBILITY?

## When You Begin Asking the Question

Some brave soul will ask the question. It's not that he or she wants closure any more than you do, but they desire to understand what God may be doing. Engage, don't avoid, the question. It will certainly move you to prayer and may lead to discovery of God's plan whether to close or not.

## When You've Pursued Other Options

Perhaps your congregation has met with consultants, attempted new outreach activities, pursued partnerships or mergers, and considered redeveloping part of your campus to no avail. God may be guiding in a different way. Pray for discernment; He will give it.

## When You're Unable to Support a Pastor

The congregation is the people of God gathered around His Word and Sacraments. Congregations are found in various forms, sizes, and locations, but should be served by a pastor. If your congregation is no longer able to support a pastor on its own, or in partnership with another LCMS church, it may be time to consider joining with another congregation to be fed, encouraged, and led by God's Word.

## When You're Struggling to Meet Financial Obligations

Congregations are also organizations with bylaws, leaders, boards, and obligations. If yours is of such a size or condition that it's no longer able to meet its financial obligations, provide for staff, or maintain the buildings and property, it may be time to consider redirecting resources for other gospel ministries. If the primary way you're financially sustained is through rental income, determine the value of maintaining the congregation vs. investing in other mission endeavors.

## When You Have Fewer Than Twenty-Five Worshippers

There is no set number that defines a congregation, whether at its beginning or its end. Again, the faithful ministry of Word and Sacraments among God's people reveals His Church. That noted, aging congregations which have declined to fewer than 25 active members have greater difficulty revitalizing their culture and reaching others with the Word.



# WHICH STEPS SHOULD WE TAKE THROUGHOUT THE CLOSURE PROCESS?

## 1. Pray

Pray for God's guidance and for unity among your congregation. Pray not only as you gather, but gather just to pray. God promises generous wisdom (James 1:5) and extraordinary peace (Philippians 4:6-7) to those who present their requests in faith. He will keep those promises, as He does all others, and answer you. God's direction, not our motivations, should guide any decision.

## 2. Consult the District

Please contact the District as you begin discussions about closure, merger, or any other significant decisions. The District President, District Executives, and Circuit Visitors are ready and able to guide you. The PSD Ministry Executive or Circuit Visitor should be your initial contact. (See below for contact information.)

## 3. Host Opportunities for Discussion Before a Decision


Host a congregation forum (perhaps a few of them) in which questions may be answered and options discussed. Invite a representative from the District to participate and offer guidance. Give people genuine opportunities to process and pray about this decision.

## 4. Observe Your Constitution and Bylaws

Whether or not your bylaws have specific direction for closing the congregation, it certainly has procedures for properly convened congregational meetings. Please honor these as you schedule a final vote. When making the decision to close, please invest legal authority in at least two officers or representatives to conduct any remaining business of behalf of the organization for six to twelve months after you've disbanded. As the last action of that final meeting, approve the minutes of that meeting before adjourning.

## 5. Provide Care for Worshippers and Workers

The Church is not the buildings, land, or programs, but the people of God. Take great care of these treasures, helping each to connect with a new church home and/or to receive pastoral care. (Do this in such a way that sufficient members remain to make key decisions.) The Circuit Visitor is a wonderful resource and partner in this endeavor. Provide generous compensation, including severance, and benefits for your workers. Support them as they pursue other call and opportunities.



# WHICH STEPS SHOULD WE TAKE THROUGHOUT THE CLOSURE PROCESS?

## 6. Decide How to Transfer or Distribute Assets

If a congregation closes without designating assets to the District or another non-profit organization, its constitution prescribes that these, along with its liabilities, will be transferred to the District. The District works with real estate and legal professionals to facilitate these transfers. Again, the District is committed to either redeveloping the property for other ministry or returning a majority of the liquidated assets for new mission in the congregation's broader community.

Congregations do retain the legal authority to designate their property or assets to other ministry or non-profit organizations. Please remember that offerings and gifts were given to God for Lutheran gospel ministry and their best use is for that continued purpose. The District is pleased to offer suggestions for designating resources to other partner ministries.

## 7. Consult an Attorney and/or Coordinate with Your State


Most congregations are not just recognized by the Synod but registered with their state as a non-profit organization. Disbanding the organization may require guidance from the Secretary of State's office, as well as specific documentation. Congregations are often well-served to contact an attorney about these legal requirements. The District is pleased to offer recommendations as needed.

## 8. Transfer Records and Significant Items to District Archives

The District retains archives of all official congregational records (e.g. baptisms, confirmations, weddings, meeting minutes). Please offer these, and any physical items of historic significance (e.g. stained glass, baptismal font) to the PSD Archivist. (See below for contact information). Other physical items, from chairs and tables to banners and paraments, may be offered to partner congregations, including those across the Mexican border. Contact Lutheran Border Concerns Ministry through their website, [www.lutherborderconcernsministry.org](http://www.lutherborderconcernsministry.org), to inquire. You may also offer a history of the congregation to the Concordia Historical Institute at [www.concordiahistoricalinstitute.org](http://www.concordiahistoricalinstitute.org).

## 9. Plan a Celebration Service

Whether with 10 or 100 people who have been blessed by God through the ministry of your congregation, celebrate the extraordinary things He has done over the years. Please invite the District President or District representative to participate in such a service, along with any who may have been part of the congregation throughout the years. Please contact the District for a sample order of service.



# WHAT ACTIONS OR ASSUMPTIONS SHOULD WE AVOID AS WE CLOSE?

## Believing Its "Our Congregation"

We are God's people and belong to him, as do our congregations. He initiated and sustained them, and now will redeem the organization and its resources for other ministry. No matter how much you have given or how long you have remained, the congregation belongs to God. We seek His guidance for the future, never assuming that it mirrors our own.

## Assuming That Every Organization Must Be Revitalized

Though gathered around Word and Sacraments, congregations also develop their own unique culture, traditions, and activity. These, which once served them well, may become a hindrance to ministry among a different generation or no longer meet the needs of a changed neighborhood.

People often ask why revitalizing their congregation wouldn't be just as impactful as planting a new church. Sometimes, revitalization is the answer. Many times, relinquishing long standing patterns and habits requires something new. Though Word and Sacrament will always remain, a new ministry may need to be reborn from a dying congregation.

## Leaving Assets in Hands of Too Few with Other Agendas

Some congregations endeavor to survive until the last member remains. It's understandable, as their church has been their home, but not advisable as organizational decisions and responsibilities were never intended for just a few people. Unfortunately, some churches have witnessed the last remaining member(s) misuse its assets for their personal benefit. Be encouraged to make a shared, missional decision about the future and resources of the congregation.

## Distributing Assets to Benefit Individuals

Assets, whether cash or property, may not be disbursed or returned to the benefit of any individual members or donors. These gifts were given to the congregation for (Lutheran) gospel ministry and should be designated by the remaining body, or its successor (i.e. District) for that purpose.

The Pacific Southwest District has committed to designating a majority of the funds or any assets from a disbanded congregation to future ministry in its broader community. Be careful of real estate agents, property managers, etc. who may position themselves as partners and seek to direct the congregation's resources. Again, the District is pleased to refer trusted, professional organizations for this work.

## Providing Assets to Non-Christian Charities

Under the law, any assets from a church or non-profit ministry may only be designated to another non-profit organization. While this may include charitable organizations (e.g. American Cancer Society, Meals on Wheels), congregations should be mindful that offerings and donations were given to God through Lutheran ministries.

Consider blessing sister congregations, the Pacific Southwest District, the LC-MS, Concordia universities, Concordia seminaries, etc. with the gifts that God has given.

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The verses we shared at the beginning of this document indicated that God works in all things. The concept “all” appears in some other familiar Bible passages:

“Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”

1 Thessalonians 5:18

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say rejoice.”

Philippians 4:4

The Greek words for “give thanks” and “rejoice” share the same root word: “charis,” meaning grace. We give thanks at all times and rejoice in all circumstances, because God’s grace is always at work among us. We are always forgiven, always loved, always blessed. Christ’s resurrection is proof that no circumstance will limit Him or define us. “In all things, we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.” Closing a congregation is not cause for asking “Where did we go wrong?” as much as “Where do we see God’s grace at work?”

In all things, we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

Romans 8:37

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## CLOSURE CHECKLIST:

- Pray for God’s guidance and discernment
- Offer multiple opportunities to discuss the options
- Invite District to participate in the process
- Consult Your congregation’s constitution and bylaws
- Make a kingdom-focused decision
- Transfer or distribute assets for Lutheran gospel ministry
- Provide for your pastor and/or church workers as they depart
- Ensure all worshippers find a new church home
- Work with District to provide the required documents and records



### Contacts:

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